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SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/RA, DRL, INL, G/TIP, EB
STATE PLEASE PASS TO USTR--JASON BUNTIN
DEPT. OF LABOR FOR DR.SUDHA HALEY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: ELAB ETRD PHUM OA

SUBJECT: ASIAN LABOR DEMOGRAPHICS AND EXPERIENCE

¶1. (U) Summary. Poloff hosted a group of Asian labor attaches for lunch on May 17. Labor attaches from Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka attended. Poloff also met individually with attaches from Bangladesh, China and India. For the most part, the attaches openly expressed their views about the labor situation in Qatar and the experience of their nationals. While the attaches welcomed the new labor law, they criticized it for not including domestic workers, easing sponsorship rules, establishing a minimum wage, or providing a formal mechanism for ensuring the payment of wages, such as automatic deposit. All concurred that the stringent requirements for changing sponsorship have created a situation of forced servitude in Qatar. A lack of coordination with source country embassies and inadequate and inefficient enforcement of the new labor law continue to contribute to labor disputes as well. The attaches did acknowledge, however, that overall labor conditions have improved and that labor conditions in Qatar are better than in previous years, and better than those elsewhere in the region. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Various meetings over the past nine months as well as a recent luncheon for labor attaches of Asian source countries provided Poloff with the opportunity to learn more about the concerns and problems of individual expatriate communities. While workers from each country face similar labor problems and concerns, some problems remain specific to particular ethnic groups. Poloff was also able to gather some demographic information about the Asian labor force in Qatar. The figures below, specifically the population size of particular labor communities, are often understated as labor attaches are reluctant to give the actual numbers. There is real and shared concern that knowledge of the actual size of the individual populations may lead to government restrictions or bans on the issuance of work visas to those source countries.

¶3. (U) Expatriates constitute approximately eighty-five percent of the population in Qatar. Asian nationals make up the majority of the expatriate community—an estimated seventy-three percent. Their size alone dictates that their community endures the brunt of labor problems and disputes. In speaking with the different labor attaches, it became apparent that some communities share the same labor problems and issues.

Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal and Sri Lanka

¶4. (U) Bangladeshi, Nepalese, and Sri Lankan workers face similar problems and concerns. Among some of the problems encountered are: abuse, delayed payment and nonpayment of salaries, overwork and abuse of housemaids, and poor living conditions at labor camps. A major problem are low wages. Employment agencies in Doha charge high commissions to find workers employment. Some employees also deduct various fees from the workers, salaries, e.g. residence permit fees. Further exacerbating the problem is the poor economic situation in Sri Lanka. According to the labor attaches, the economic situation in Sri Lanka is leading to a decline in the average real wages of foreign unskilled workers in Qatar. Because Sri Lankan laborers are willing to work for less, laborers from the other countries are being forced to accept smaller salaries if they are to find and keep employment.

¶5. (U) Recruitment is also an issue for workers. Workers seeking employment in Qatar pay large sums to recruiting agents in their countries. Often they arrive in Qatar only to find out that they have no jobs. Recruiting agents also lie about the nature of jobs and living conditions in Qatar. Some agents tell the workers that they are going to work in companies, hotels, or restaurants, but when the workers arrive in Qatar, they are forced to work in menial positions or given over to individuals. Some women who were recruited for other positions end up working as housemaids once in Qatar. Work contracts represent another problem area. Once in Qatar, contracts are not adhered to and the wages are reduced from the original amount agreed upon. These workers are also involved in numerous labor disputes because the majority of them do not speak or read Arabic. As a result, they sign documents without knowing their content.

16. (U) Bangladeshi, Indonesian, Nepalese and Sri Lankan women are discouraged from coming to Qatar to work as housemaids because of the abuse some housemaids face. The women need the approval of their embassies in order to work in Qatar. However, to circumvent this prohibition, recruitment and employment agencies send the women to other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries before sending them to Qatar, as no visa is required for citizens of ASEAN countries to travel to other member countries. The housemaid problem is particularly acute in the case of Indonesia, as 67 percent of its laborers in Qatar are women working as housemaids.

India and Pakistan

17. (U) At approximately 200,000, India has the largest expatriate population in Qatar. Because of this size, about which the Government of Qatar is sensitive, the Indian Embassy is reluctant to provide official statistics on their population. In fact, the tendency is to under-report the numbers. In the past year there have been a few cases of Indians entering Qatar with forged Nepalese passports. Indian laborers also encounter problems with unscrupulous recruiting agents who charge workers large fees for finding them work only to find that when the workers arrive to Qatar they do not have a job. Many workers are also made to pay high residence fees that are the responsibility of the sponsor. Domestic workers also complain of overwork, nonpayment, sexual harassment and physical abuse. More than one-third of labor complaints filed at the Indian Embassy involve domestic workers. Some small businesses have also complained of being cheated by their Qatari sponsors.

18. (U) While the Pakistani population does not approach that of India, the Government of Qatar has ceased issuing new work visas to Pakistanis. In fact, only 5,000 Pakistanis were allowed into Qatar in the last five years. These newcomers are from Western countries and hold dual nationalities. With their qualification and citizenship they have been able to get better jobs and have better working conditions. Pakistani women are not allowed to enter Qatar to work as domestic workers. In the last few years, salaries for Pakistani laborers have decreased due to competition from their Indian, Nepalese and Sri Lankan laborers who work for lower wages.

The Philippines

19. (U) According to the Filipino attache, the majority of Filipino workers are women working as housemaids. Filipina housemaids also complain of overwork, nonpayment, sexual harassment and physical abuse. There are also many Filipinos working as technicians and engineers. Some of them are required to work long hours without being paid overtime. Upon their arrival to Qatar, some workers find that their wages are reduced sometimes by as much as fifty percent from the original amount agreed upon in the Philippines. Since January 2005, 6,343 Filipinos have entered Qatar to work. This increase is largely due to the current expansion in the construction sector as a result of the upcoming Asian Games in 2006.

China

110. (U) Chinese workers are just beginning to come for work in Qatar. Their number is very small, but according to the Chinese economic and commercial attache, the number of Chinese laborers is expected to double by the end of 2005 due to a recent government construction contract. The number of Chinese is expected to further increase in years to come, as there are numerous pending projects with Chinese companies. Under these projects, Chinese companies will supply their own laborers. There are not many unskilled Chinese laborers in Qatar because of a lack of competitive advantage. Wages in Qatar are low, as are living standards for laborers. The average Chinese laborer can earn the same if not more in China and does not have to leave his family. Unskilled workers who come to Qatar do so because they are promised overtime. They also tend to face problems such as delayed payments and contractual disputes. Language also poses a major obstacle, as the laborers do not speak Arabic or English. Skilled workers, on the other hand, come with their companies for specific projects and have a fixed salary, and thus do not have labor disputes that the unskilled and locally hired workers do.

The Impact of Soaring Rents

¶11. (U) The attaches commented on the impact of the housing crisis in Qatar on their nationals. Soaring rents and a shortage of affordable housing in Doha have laborers reconsidering working and staying in Qatar and are forcing many to reside at their workplace or share rooms and apartments with other laborers. Many also send their families back home because they cannot afford the high rents.

Improving Conditions

¶12. (U) The attaches concluded by emphasizing that while there are numerous labor issues in their communities, they had nevertheless observed a general improvement in the conditions of expatriate laborers in Qatar. They viewed the new labor law as a step in the right direction, notwithstanding some weaknesses. They noted that the Labor Department needs to be more efficient and expeditious in resolving labor disputes but recognized that the Department is severely understaffed to handle the volume of disputes and issues. All concurred that the labor situation in Qatar is better than in other Gulf countries. What follows are some employment data for each ethnic population as provided by the respective embassies.

Population by Ethnic Group

¶13. (U) India: There are approximately 200,000 Indians in Qatar. An estimated 140,000 are workers. Thirty-five thousand are skilled professionals and about 105,000 are unskilled laborers. Domestic workers number between six to eight thousand.

Bangladesh: There are approximately 100,000 Bangladeshis living in Qatar. An estimated 60,000 are male workers and the remaining 40,000 are family members.

Nepal: There are approximately 60,320 Nepalese in Qatar. An estimated 60,000 are male workers and the remaining 320 are female workers.

Pakistan: There are approximately 60,000 Pakistanis in Qatar. An estimated 35,000 are male workers and the remaining 25,000 are family members.

Sri Lanka: There are approximately 55,000 Sri Lankans in Qatar. An estimated 40,000 are male workers and 15,000 female workers.

The Philippines: There are approximately 45,000 Filipinos in Qatar. An estimated 42,000 are documented and 3,000 are undocumented. Approximately 16,200 are male workers and 28,800 are female workers.

Indonesia: There are approximately 18,000 Indonesians in Qatar. An estimated 3,000 are male workers and 15,000 female workers. Twelve thousand of the female workers are housemaids.

China: There are approximately 1,000 male Chinese workers in Qatar, 500 skilled, 500 unskilled.

Work Sectors by Ethnic Group

¶14. (U) India: hospital, banks, electric, technical, government, sales, gas and oil, small business owners, domestic workers

Bangladesh: construction, government, oil, banking, electricity, public works, small business owners, education, medical, domestic helpers

Nepal: construction, airline, security, hospitality, hospital, sales

Pakistan: small business owners, banking, government sector, construction

Sri Lanka: construction, domestic workers

The Philippines: domestic workers, education, engineering, construction, hospital, government, communication, banking, gas, oil, electricity, service, private commerce

Indonesia: domestic workers, hospitality, sales

China: construction, hotel, restaurants

Earnings by Ethnic Group

15 (U) India: The average skilled professional earns between \$330 to \$825 a month plus food and accommodation. Some managers and individuals in the technical field can earn up to \$5,000 to \$7,000 monthly. Unskilled workers earn between \$140-\$165 a month plus food and accommodation.

Bangladesh: The average skilled professional earns between \$190 to \$550 monthly, with doctors, engineers, bankers falling at the latter end of the scale. Those in the electric, oil, public works fields may earn as much as \$1,920-\$2,200. Unskilled laborers earn \$110 plus food and accommodation.

Nepal: The average skilled worker earns \$800 a month plus food and accommodation. Unskilled workers earn \$140, with domestics earning \$110 plus food and accommodation

Pakistan: The average skilled worker earns \$275 a month plus food and accommodation. Unskilled workers earn \$165 plus food and accommodation.

Sri Lanka: The average unskilled worker earns \$125 a month plus food and accommodation.

The Philippines: The average skilled worker earns between \$680 and \$780 a month plus food and accommodation. Semi-skilled workers earn \$370 plus food and accommodation and unskilled workers earn between \$200-\$277 plus food and accommodation. The wages of domestic workers fall at the lower end.

Indonesia: The average skilled worker earns between \$220-\$550 a month plus food and accommodation. Unskilled workers earn between \$150-\$250 plus food and accommodation. The wages of domestic workers fall at the lower end.

China: The average skilled worker earns more than \$250 a month plus food and accommodation. Unskilled workers earn about \$250.

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